Power restored in Berlin after five days

BERLIN: Power was fully restored on Wednesday to tens of thousands of homes in Berlin and businesses hit by a blackout lasting five days. The German metropolis plunged into darkness on Saturday after an arson attack claimed by left-wing extremists.

Some 45,000 households and 2,200 businesses suffered after high-voltage cables were set alight, raising questions about Germany's resilience to sabotage of its critical infrastructure.

All had been reconnected to the grid early on Wednesday afternoon.

The attack was claimed online by an extremist group calling itself the Vulkangruppe (Volcano Group).

The case comes at a time when Germany, a strong backer of Ukraine, has accused Russia of a spate of "hybrid attacks", from drone overflights and espionage to online disinformation.

However, an interior ministry spokeswoman said there were no signs that Russia was involved.

Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt has "stated very clearly that this arson attack qualifies as an act of left-wing terrorism", the spokeswoman said.

"We consider the claim of responsibility to be authentic," she added, dismissing reports that the text read more clearly when back-translated into Russian.

The Vulkangruppe has claimed responsibility for 12 attacks since 2011, including an act of sabotage targeting the Tesla factory near Berlin in March 2024, when power lines were set on fire.

German federal prosecutors on Tuesday launched a terrorism investigation into the most recent attack.

An 83-year-old woman who lived in the area died during the blackout.

The woman was found alive in her flat by a relative who had been caring for her, but she died after being picked up in an ambulance.—AFP

US immigration agent fatally shoots woman

MINNEAPOLIS: A US immigration agent shot and killed a 37-year-old woman in her car in Minneapolis on Wednesday amid an enforcement surge - the latest violent incident during President Donald Trump's crackdown on migrants.

Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey adamantly rejected the Trump administration's claim that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent fired in self-defence, saying he has seen video of the shooting that contradicts the government's "garbage narrative". "They're already trying to spin this as an action of self-defence," he said at a press conference. "Having seen the video myself, I want to tell everybody directly - that is nonsense."

A visibly angry Frey said federal immigration agents were responsible for sowing chaos in the city, telling ICE: "Get out of Minneapolis."

But he also urged residents to remain calm.

The shooting drew protesters into the streets near the scene, some of whom were met by heavily armed federal agents wearing gas masks who fired chemical irritants at the demonstrators.—Reuters

CARS destroyed in a Russian drone strike stand in front of a damaged apartment building in Dnipro.—Reuters

Europe gave no security pledge, says Zelensky

Ukrainian president urges US to topple Chechen leader after Maduro

KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Wednesday he had received no "unequivocal answer" from European allies about how they would defend Ukraine in the event Russia attacked again should a deal to end the war be reached.

On Tuesday, European leaders and US envoys announced that they had agreed key security guarantees for Kyiv, including a US-led monitoring mechanism and a European multinational force that would be deployed if a ceasefire could be reached.

But when asked if he was sure that European allies would step in and defend his country in the event of another Russian invasion, Zelensky said he had no "clear" answer on that.

"I personally very much want to get a very simple answer: yes, if there is aggression again, all partners will give a strong response to the Russians. And that's the exact question I put to all our partners. And so far I haven't received a clear, unequivocal answer," Zelensky told reporters.

He said there was "political will" from Kyiv's allies to "give us strong security guarantees". "But until we have such security guarantees — legal ones, backed by parliaments, backed by the United States Congress — we cannot answer this question." Envoys from the United States and Ukraine were continuing talks in Paris on the issues that Zelensky said were the most difficult: the fate of the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant and control of territory in eastern Ukraine.

'US should topple Kadyrov'

The United States should pressure Russia by "carrying out some sort of operation" to remove Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov from power, just like it did with Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, Zelensky said.

In comments to journalists, Zelensky said the operation to remove Maduro showed that Washington had the power to influence Moscow if it really wished, arguing that deposing Kadyrov would make Russian President Vladimir Putin "think twice" about his ongoing offensive on Ukraine.

US special forces snatched Maduro and his wife from Caracas, shocking Washington's allies and drawing condemnation from Venezuela's partner Moscow.

Kadyrov, the leader of Russia's Muslim-majority region of Chechnya since 2007, is one of Putin's most vocal supporters and sent thousands of soldiers to fight in Ukraine. "They need to put pressure on Russia. They have the tools, they know how.

And when they really want to, they can find them," Zelensky said of the United States.

"Here's an example with Maduro. They carried out an operation... Everyone can see the result, the whole world can see. They did it promptly. Let them carry out some sort of operation with, what's his name — Kadyrov," Zelensky said.

Hours after the US operation to capture Maduro, Zelensky had joked that Putin himself should also be targeted.

"If you can do that with dictators, then the United States knows what to do next," he said at a press conference in Kyiv over the weekend, laughing and smiling.—AFP

Transport chaos in Europe as cold snap toll rises

PARIS: Snow, ice, and high winds brought transport chaos to swathes of Europe for a third day on Wednesday, with hundreds of flights cancelled and passengers stranded.

Airports in Paris and Amsterdam were the worst affected, with the Dutch authorities saying more than 1,000 travellers had been forced to spend the night at Schiphol, one of Europe's busiest hubs.

Seven people have died in weather-related accidents as the continent reels from the most bitter cold snap of the winter so far.

Hungary's interior ministry said on Wednesday that a woman had died after a car skidded on ice and crashed into another vehicle, adding to five people killed in France and one in Bosnia since the winter freeze descended on Monday.

With snowfall continuing on Wednesday, skiers and snowboarders enjoyed hurtling down the steep hills of the Montmartre district in Paris.

But the cold snap came as a bitter shock to the French capital's many homeless people.

Guinean teenager Boubacar Camara, who is sleeping in a tent on the city's outskirts, said he had "no choice but to keep on going".

Almost half of mainland France was on alert for heavy snow and black ice, and lorries were banned from the roads in some areas, forcing truckers off the road while waiting for permission to get going again.

"It's better to be here than stuck on the road," said driver Carle Bruno, who managed to get to a roadside service station in the northern port city of Le Havre to wait out the weather.

In the Netherlands, Schiphol Airport said more than 700 flights had been cancelled so far and warned that the number was likely to increase.

Brussels Airport confirmed 40 cancellations on Wednesday, and Budapest Airport in Hungary said 20 flights had been cancelled overnight.—AFP

S. Korea urges China to help curb North's nuke plan

SHANGHAI: South Korean President Lee Jae Myung said Wednesday he had urged Chinese leader Xi Jinping to help him curb Pyongyang's nuclear programme and suggested a freeze in its development of weapons of mass destruction was "feasible" with the right conditions.

Lee's visit to China this week was the first by a South Korean leader in six years, with Seoul seeking a broad reset in relations with its largest trading partner as well as help with the recalcitrant North.

He met with Xi in Beijing on Monday — a day after the nuclear-armed North fired two ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan.

Speaking to journalists in Shanghai as he wrapped up the visit, he said he had urged Beijing's help in bringing Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.

He said he told Xi he would "like China to play a mediating role on issues related to the Korean Peninsula, including North Korea's nuclear programme".

"All our channels are completely blocked," he said. "We hope China can serve as a mediator — a mediator for peace," he added.—AFP

Self-driving cars steal limelight at Las Vegas show

LAS VEGAS: Even if Elon Musk's dream of robotaxis for everyone is a long way off, sleek electric cars powered by artificial intelligence packed the Consumer Electronics Show, promising to liberate people from the tedium of driving.

Letting go of the steering wheel is no longer a fantasy: Waymo's robotaxis in the United States and China's Apollo Go, which has been growing rapidly over the past year, have demonstrated the reliability of fully autonomous driving, where responsibility lies with the machine and not the human.

Rivals such as Uber are fast emerging. The ride-sharing giant used the CES event in Las Vegas to debut a Lucid robotaxi, aiming to put a fleet of them to work in San Francisco later this year.

Offering the fully autonomous experience — known as Level 4 autonomy — to vehicle owners on a mass scale remains the industry's goal.

"I don't see it happening for years," said Marc Amblard, of Orsay Consulting.

Only Tensor, a Silicon Valley start-up, is present in Vegas with a Level 4 passenger car. A first model is expected to hit the road in the coming months.

Touted as the "first personal robot car on Earth," it is a luxury vehicle equipped with 34 cameras, five lidar lasers, and over a hundred sensors, with analysts estimating its price tag at around $200,000.

Its autonomous driving will be limited.

The company is currently authorized to conduct tests in California and could benefit from favorable legislation in Texas, Nevada, and Arizona, as well as its partnership in the United Arab Emirates.

Roadblocks

But regulatory approval and societal acceptance have remained roadblocks to self-driving cars becoming commonplace.

"From a technology standpoint, it is there," said Pier Paolo Porta, marketing director at Ambarella, which specializes in autonomous driving systems.

"But from a legal and from a liability standpoint, it is still a gray area." Given the roadblocks, it is in the area of Level 2 assisted driving — where the driver must be ready to take back control — the industry's flagship projects are flourishing.

And these are going further in terms of automation, largely thanks to advances in AI that make computers more efficient with fewer expensive sensors.

Driving where the steering wheel and pedals can be fully operated by a computer, while remaining legally under the driver's responsibility, is the experience already offered by Musk's Tesla in the United States with its Full Self-Driving system, and by Xiaomi and BYD in China.

'ChatGPT moment'?

It is at this level of autonomy that competition is intensifying.

Chip powerhouse Nvidia on Monday unveiled Alpamayo, an AI platform specially designed for autonomous driving, which will be available on electric Mercedes CLA models in the United States this year.

"Alpamayo brings reasoning to autonomous vehicles, allowing them to think through rare scenarios, drive safely in complex scenarios, and explain their driving decisions," Nvidia chief executive Jensen Huang said during a presentation at CES.

Huang declared that a "ChatGPT moment for physical AI" was here, essentially enabling cars and robots to interact with the real world independently. During a demonstration in December, a self-driving Mercedes negotiated congested San Francisco traffic with a human safety driver only intervening to navigate around an ambulance stopped in the middle of the road.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS

PARIS: A skier skis past the Eiffel Tower at the Champ de Mars covered in snow, following snowfall.—AFP

PRISTINA: A firefighter rescues a child from a flooded house after heavy rainfall in a village near the Kosovo capital.—Reuters

INDIAN director Hamisha Daryani Ahuja poses for a photograph in Lagos.—AFP/File

Nollywood meets Bollywood: filmmaker fuses Indian, Nigerian cultures

LAGOS: The greeting "namaste" associated with yoga and the Pidgin word for trouble, "wahala", widely used across the world thanks to Afrobeats, speaks to Indian and Nigerian influences on the English language.

But the film industries of the two countries, each a regional behemoth, have rarely crossed cultures.

Indian-Nigerian filmmaker Hamisha Daryani Ahuja, however, did just that, naming her first movie — aimed at bringing together the world's two largest film industries, Bollywood and Nollywood — *Namaste Wahala*. "Nollywood has grown up on Bollywood," the Mumbai-born, Lagos-raised Ahuja said in an interview, referring to the popularity of Bollywood films in Nigeria.

"How come they never come together?" she said. Her film became a global hit when it was released by Netflix during the COVID-19 pandemic — signalling the start of a collaboration between the two massive movie sectors.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi even mentioned the film during his visit to Nigeria in late 2024.

And another *Namaste Wahala* film is now in the works, Ahuja revealed.

Since the 2020 release of her debut film, Ahuja has also had a Netflix series called *Postcards* and is preparing to premiere *Simi and Friends* this year.

With no formal movie-making training, *Namaste Wahala* — a cross-cultural rom-com whose title means "Hello trouble" — was "her schooling" in film, she said.

Shot in Lagos, it is about an Indian investment banker who falls in love with a Nigerian lawyer — and their parents' struggle to accept their union. A potpourri of languages, actors switch between English, Pidgin, and Hindi. "I decided to jump in without a thought," she recalled during a recent interview in the bustling mega-metropolis of Lagos, where she lives.

India and Nigeria combined are probably the world's biggest diaspora, "we have mass populations, but more than that, but maybe less tangible, our culture is so loud", the 41-year-old said.—AFP

ALEPPO: Residents carry their belongings as they flee a Kurdish neighbourhood after the Syrian army declared it a "closed military zone" amid deadly clashes.—AFP

STRASBOURG (France): A placard reading "Europe, Do you still want your agriculture?" is on display on a tractor as farmers take part in a rally to protest the EU-Mercosur deal and the French government's agricultural policy.—AFP